

executive summary

This publication culminates six months of research commissioned by World Vision in 2006. The purpose of the research was to review the operations of the African Union (AU) with a view to identifying opportunities for engagement as a means of informing a two-pronged World Vision (WV) Africa advocacy strategy.

The AU is increasingly being viewed as a critical focus of civil society advocacy because it is playing an unprecedented and pro-active role in addressing Africa's crises, is exercising leadership in global negotiations, and is being taken seriously by the international community. The demise of the Organisation of African Unity (OAU) and advent of the AU in 2002 has marked the emergence of a new Pan-Africanism. The sacred cow of sovereignty enshrined in the OAU's credo of non-interference and non-aggression has given way to a new doctrine mandating the right to intervene to restore peace and security in specific circumstances, including unconstitutional changes of government.

While working at the grassroots or micro level is viewed as a critical undertaking, and on the basis of the new opportunities around the AU, the conventional wisdom among civil society organisations (CSOs) is that only by engaging in policy advocacy at the highest level of decision-making on the continent can real and sustainable impact be registered in addressing poverty and injustice in Africa.

The AU system consists of several important policymaking institutions – notably the Assembly; Executive Council; Permanent Representatives Committee; Specialised Technical Committees; Economic Social and Cultural Council; Pan-African Parliament; Peace and Security Council; and the African Court on Human and People's Rights. The AU Commission constitutes the bureaucratic and technocratic engine of the Union, and is therefore a key focus for any organisation wishing to engage on continental issues. The scope of its work programme, as spelled out in the Strategic Plan 2004-2007, reflects its ambition. So too do the proposal to establish three financial institutions and Union Government. Also of importance in the African institutional landscape is the

New Partnership for Africa's Development (NEPAD); the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM); and the Regional Economic Communities (RECs). Another important structure is the revitalised Joint Secretariat, bringing together the AU, United Nations Economic Commission for Africa and African Development Bank.

While the AU's establishment demonstrates steady progress in Africa's quest for ownership of its own agenda, many challenges remain. One is the proliferation of AU organs and initiatives. Another is the sheer ambition of its strategic vision, amidst limited capacity and growing external expectation and demand for engagement. A third is the gulf between continental policymaking and national implementation. All these challenges force any institution wishing to engage with the AU to necessarily be realistic about what is achievable and what is not. They also imply a need to focus on a range of African institutions and initiatives, as opposed to solely on the AU Commission.

Institutional opportunities for civil society engagement with the AU are spelled out in Chapter 2. Key among the mechanisms, structures and spaces is the Economic Social and Cultural Council (ECOSOCC), established under the Constitutive Act to provide a permanent space for civil society to advise African governments collectively via the AU. While most see ECOSOCC as an important window for influencing AU policy, there are concerns that it is elitist and designed to circumscribe CSO participation in continental policymaking. Its advisory status is viewed as a constraint, and much remains to be done at sub-regional and country level to foster greater inclusion in its membership. Nevertheless, civil society can also engage with the AU via the Citizens Directorate or directly with the Commission's thematic Directorates.

The pre-Summit Forum, where CSOs gather to meet on the fringes of the biannual AU Summit, is considered by many to be an important space to influence continental policy, although the conclusion is that its potential will only be realised if CSOs de-link from the official programme and organise events autonomously. The

chapter points to a CSO mechanism in the Economic Community of West African States (ECOWAS) and the African Commission on Human and People's Rights as potential models. CSO structures and opportunities around NEPAD and the APRM are also critically appraised, while ongoing initiatives to establish civil society hubs in Addis Ababa (around the AU) and Midrand (around NEPAD, the APRM and PAP) are highlighted.

In Chapter 3, modes of engagement around the AU agenda are analysed, and tensions in the CSO-AU relationship examined in some detail. CSO modes of engagement with the AU generally tend to involve providing technical input to programmatic work; advocating on behalf of the AU; working as implementing partners; or being contracted to deliver specific outputs. A fear among African activists is that because of the lack of capacity, civil society experts end up writing the AU Commission's policies. In terms of tensions, while theorists speak of a "new participatory paradigm" necessitating a "critical form of engagement", in reality the absence of this recognition on both sides results in a blurred line along which AU-CSO relations happen.

Two types of CSO actors are identified – insiders comfortable with the evolving ECOSOCC; and outsiders who are becoming increasingly frustrated with what they consider to be the arbitrary and ad hoc way CSO engagement is organised. Increasingly, the crisis of expectations is pushing this second group to organise autonomously. Another pertinent issue raised in this chapter is the perceived dichotomy between international and African civil society, and the perceived efforts to exclude INGOs from membership of the ECOSOCC structure. This raises questions of legitimacy and authenticity, with one group speaking to the need for INGOs to take a back seat and work with coalitions, and to invest in building the capacity of indigenous African NGOs and CSOs as a deliberate strategy. Another school of thought asserts that successful advocacy necessitates pressure in both the North and South, and argues that a symbiotic approach between African and international NGOs is needed for real impact.

Chapter 4 spells out key themes on which CSOs have hinged their advocacy efforts. While the AU Commission's Strategic Plan 2004-2007 constitutes an ambitious shopping list, in practice the Commission cannot engage on every issue with the same intensity or dynamism. The elaboration of a new Strategic Plan from 2008 onwards constitutes potentially the single most important opportunity to influence the AU programmatically. While such a new plan is likely to be more focused, it will inevitably seek to address a number of themes experts consider to be at the heart of the new Pan-Africanism. The chapter highlights a subset of these issues, providing illustrations of how CSOs have engaged on them.

On Economic Justice, developing and articulating African positions on aid, trade and debt is viewed as being at the core of the AU Commission's advocacy role. On aid, the AU's advocacy for larger aid volumes leaves room for CSO engagement around aid effectiveness. On debt, the AU's position is that the Multilateral Debt Relief Initiative (MDRI) be extended to all African countries. However, it is on trade that the AU has developed its strongest niche, rallying African policymakers to develop common positions in advance of critical World Trade Organisation (WTO) talks. CSOs have been actively involved as observers at AU Ministerial meetings, and this theme constitutes fertile ground for AU-CSO collaboration.

Gender is one theme around which there has been effective collaboration between the AU and CSOs, with the Solidarity for African Women's Rights Campaign (SOAWR) triggering the coming into force of Protocol to the African Charter on Human and People's Rights on the Rights of Women in Africa by successfully lobbying for ratifications. The strategy, which combined creating a sense of outrage with constructive engagement, is widely viewed as a model. On governance, Africa's agenda is largely being stewarded outside of the AU Commission, with the African Peer Review Mechanism providing unprecedented opportunities for civil society participation.

On HIV and AIDS, CSOs have been extremely active, harnessing the African Common Position developed by the

Community Care Coalition members meet to discuss agriculture and development challenges they are experiencing within their community. Keembe, Zambia.

photo: Collins Kaumba



AU for the 2006 UN General Assembly Special Session on AIDS (UNGASS)¹. The African Common Position lists a number of targets to be met by 2010 – including targets related to orphans and vulnerable children (OVCs). Another important call to action is the ‘Brazzaville Commitment² on Scaling Up towards Universal Access to HIV and AIDS prevention, treatment, care and support in Africa by 2010’.

On Human Rights and Justice, an active civil society community has developed around the African Commission on Human and People’s Rights, with attention now focusing on the merger of two institutions – the African Court on Human and People’s Rights and the African Court of Justice. Thanks to a combination of civil society pressure through campaigning, and the submission of technical proposals, African leaders signed off the proposal for a single legal instrument to merge the two courts at the 7th AU Summit in Banjul in 2006. The Coalition for an Effective African Court on Human and People’s Rights, which conducted the lobbying, provides another strong example of how CSOs are influencing continental policy.

On Peace and Security, arguably the core competency of the AU, civil society has begun to engage more consistently, particularly on the situation in Darfur – possibly the biggest ever CSO mobilisation of its kind. However, although human rights CSOs have done much to highlight the responsibility of the combatants to protect, additional engagement is needed in this area. AU initiatives on child soldiers, small arms, landmines and post-conflict reconstruction also offer room for partnership. Overall, the chapter demonstrates that the AU Commission is providing leadership on key issues – in particular Trade, Peace and Security and HIV and AIDS.

The final chapter focuses on recommendations to inform World Vision’s proposed continental advocacy strategy. The chapter begins by examining the renewed optimism that African leadership is beginning to seriously engage with developing its own agenda for the continent, and the growing interest by global and multilateral organisations to work through the AU.

The second section in the chapter argues that CSOs, including World Vision, should pursue a multi-pronged

¹ <http://www.africa-union.org/root/au/conferences/past/2006/may/summit/summit.htm>

² March 2006.

Africa advocacy strategy as opposed to one focused solely on the AU Commission. Four arguments are offered in support of this recommendation. First, while the AU should be the centrepiece of a continental strategy, CSOs should also find ways to engage strategically with other AU organs. Second, given that the AU is a work in progress, with financial and staffing constraints, the reality is one of a proliferation of actors wishing to work with a Secretariat that is weak. Third, the real challenge lies not in influencing AU norms and standards but in domesticating and implementing them in African countries. Fourth, state parties are much more likely to adhere to commitments made at sub-regional than at AU level. Put together, these arguments speak to the need for World Vision to engage with a range of organs, institutions and processes in recognition of the importance of a multi-pronged engagement in different spaces, towards common objectives.

The third section of chapter 5 spells out principles to guide World Vision's continental engagement. One principle is to leverage World Vision's strengths – its focus on children, community level reach, and strong network of national offices. A second is to strike a balance between high-profile, high-visibility campaigning and more patient, process-oriented lobbying. Third, World Vision should educate senior policymakers and African decision makers as to its role, as a means of dispelling any question marks about its legitimacy to engage with the AU system. Fourth, generating the evidence base is critical to effective continental advocacy. Lastly, World Vision should work in coalitions on issues in which it does not have a comparative advantage but wants to register an impact, for example on Trade.

The chapter also suggests thematic priorities that could be the focus for World Vision in the initial phases of the continental strategy – Child Rights; Peace and Security; Economic Justice; Governance; and HIV and AIDS. The Chapter concludes by cataloguing key advocacy opportunities in 2007 and 2008.